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The Economy – From Which All Blessings Come

Really?

One of the key elements of a healthy, sustainable community is a healthy, sustainable economy. In this country, however, many people seem to believe that a healthy economy is more than just one element—it's the sole cause of everything good; if business is good, everyone automatically benefits. This belief is a variation of the “trickle down” theory: money is at the heart of the community and the blessings simply radiate out endlessly to all its citizens.

It's interesting that for us the “economy” would be considered an almost sacred creator of all things good. Some societies, no doubt primitive and backward, have considered other factors to be more important. Things like health, culture, spiritual concerns, co-operation, generosity, even children. In some, it was felt that if the society—or its pharaoh or emperor—was in contact with the divine, all would go well for the society.

Some still believe that such factors *are* important. For example, the country of Bhutan originated the concept of GNH (Gross National Happiness) instead of the GDP (Gross National Product). And the Happy Planet Index (www.happyplanetindex.org) attempts to measure human well-being and environmental impact (Vanuatu is #1, Cuba is #6, and the USA is #150. But we're still ahead of Zimbabwe which is currently in last place at #178.)

These days, at least on a national level, it seems to be the Dow Jones Industrial Average and Gross Domestic Product whose blessings we seek. Why go on about this? Because there is likely a misunderstanding of what “economy” means. Economy, in the original Greek *oikonomia*, meant “management of a household or family”. (Incidentally, the theological definition of economy is “the method of God's government of and activity within the world.”)

Household management is a very different concept than making, acquiring and hoarding money. And certainly different than our consumer-based definition of good citizenship. (“Go shopping”, we were told after 9/11.)

What does all the above ranting have to do with sustainability? Simple. True sustainability involves the responsible management and balance of a family's (or community's) needs. *Real* needs; not imagined needs. In *trade*, it involves an equilibrium of energy exchange. And money, like kindness and neighborliness, needs to be circulated and shared to give it any real meaning.

What would a sustainable economy be in the Napa Valley? Ideally, it would mean that everything we need is obtained from, or produced in, our own area, and it's all done in an environmentally responsible manner. Well, forget that. That's the ideal. But we do have trading items we can use to get the things we don't make—like cars, bananas and iPods. Most of what we have available for trade comes in bottles, squeezed out of locally grown fruit. We, as a community, trade our excess supply (what *we* don't consume ourselves) of these bottles to people who desire them—like shiny trinkets traded with primitive tribes—and in return we obtain goods that we can't produce ourselves. Economic

sustainability would be a balance in the value of the things we “import” and the things we “export”.

But that's the “macro” level for our community. What about on the day-to-day “micro” level? How do we make money and spend it to keep our families and communities healthy? A healthy, local economy would involve whenever possible purchasing good and services—that we produce or offer ourselves—from each other, rather than from those outside the community. Is that selfish? Perhaps. But if our own families and community aren't managed properly in a balanced manner, how can we even consider trying to make the larger national or international *oikonomia* successful?

A healthy, sustainable economy means getting from the outside only what we absolutely need, and reusing and recycling everything we can within our community. It also means a fair exchange of labor, done in an equitable, socially mature manner. It can mean, as a number of other communities have decided, that one hour of labor equals one hour of labor. That the labor hours of humans are equal. That the labor hour of a doctor, lawyer or Indian chief is equal to the labor hour of a mechanic, farmworker, busboy, graveyard shift janitor, childcare worker, or teacher.

This is not necessarily a popular concept.

Arguments against it include the value of years and dollars invested in acquiring knowledge and skills in order to perform certain tasks. But who is to say that seven years in college and law school to become a lawyer are more valuable and useful to the community than seven years acquiring the skills and experience to become an expert at some other profession, be it carpenter, seamstress or chef?

Back to the idea of “local”. “Buying local” doesn't just mean buying from a business located in your town. It means buying from a local business owned by someone *who lives* in your town. Local owners care about the community. It's their home. If they're having trouble with their business, they won't just close it down, fire everyone, and focus on their other 3,000 stores around the country. They'll make every effort to keep their business going, serving their neighbors and employing their locally-based staffs.

Locally-owned businesses spend much more of their money in their community than do those owned by national or international chains. A study done in the Chicago neighborhood of Andersonville found:

- For every \$100 in consumer spending with a local firm, \$68 remained in the local economy vs. \$43 for spending at a chain store.
- For every square foot occupied by a local firm, local economic impact was \$179 vs. \$105 for a chain store.

Locally-owned businesses also, despite the trumpeting of their corporate generosity by chains, devote much more money—and time—to local schools, non-profits, youth groups and the like.

What do I do?

When shopping for goods or services, keep in mind the following suggestions. If step 1 doesn't work, go to 2. If 2 doesn't have what you need, go to 3.

1. Buy locally-owned

First, try a locally-owned business. They live here and care about the community. The money you give them stays primarily within the community, and most local businesses are big supporters of community schools and organizations..

2. Buy local

Even if the business is not locally-owned, at least local government gets some of the sales tax. And some of the employees likely live in the community.

3. Buy nearby

Even if you buy from businesses in neighboring counties, at least you're helping businesses and communities in our region.

Where do I shop?

If you go to www.napanow.com/shoplocal.html, you can see a list of foods, services and other items that you *could* buy at a chain business. They range from banks and books to hardware, jewelery and office supplies. Whenever you need any of these, we recommend you first consider shopping at a locally-owned business. You'll get as good or better quality, quite likely better service, in most cases competitive prices, and you'll be supporting people who live in, and care about, our community.

We recognize also that if you live in Calistoga, for example, and you can't find what you need at a local shop, it makes more sense to go over the hill to Santa Rosa than to come all the way down to Napa—unless you're coming down here for other purposes as well. Use your own judgement but keep in mind the value of shopping in your local community.

A number of businesses and services also help you save money by having items repaired or by purchasing previously owned items. Some also give you the opportunity to recycle items that you no longer need but that someone else would be delighted to have.

In this online list, we do not include various professional, health and many other services and businesses because few if any of these are directly affected by competition from chain stores or other out-of-area businesses.

As Local First Napa says, “Be local. Buy local. Live local”

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Local Economy Websites

Local First Napa - www.localfirstnapa.org

Local chapter of the national Business Alliance for a Local Living Economy” (BALLE) organization.

Shop Local List - www.napanow.com/shoplocal.html

Local businesses that can be affected by chain stores.

Napa County Freecycle

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NapaCountyCAFreecycle/>
Recycling. No charge to offer or take “stuff”.

Sustainability Links

www.napanow.com/sustainability.html

Wide range of local sustainability websites, including businesses.

Small-Mart
www.small-mart.org
Ideas and tools for building healthy local economies

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Drinking Liberally Napa

Sustainability doesn't have to be a solitary activity. There's a place in Napa where discussions and networking take place among people interested in saving energy, growing food, generating renewable power. These folks are also interested in progressive politics. So their gatherings, which involve not only conversation but beer and wine (or soft drinks), naturally take place at regular meetings of the appropriately named "Drinking Liberally Napa", just one of more than 250 Drinking Liberally chapters around the country.

You can find more information at www.drinkingliberally.org and sign up for Drinking Liberally Napa's email list there as well. The Napa Valley Herald (www.napaValleyHerald.com) also has up-to-date information about upcoming DL Napa gatherings.

Even better would be a local chapter of Green Drinks (www.greendrinks.org). It's for people who work in the environmental field. Perhaps somebody would like to start a Napa chapter?